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# "Rules, Regulations, and the Reich: Comedy under the Auspices of the Propaganda Ministry"

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**Rules, Regulations, and the Reich:  
Comedy under the Auspices of the Propaganda Ministry**

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When the National Socialist regime assumed power in Germany on January 30, 1933, it set about immediately to formulate regulations, edicts, and policies for a renewal of the German theatre. Adolf Hitler had an interest of longstanding in the theatre, and Nazi strategies for controlling, supporting, and re-generating the theatre went into effect over a period of about eighteen months. On September 22, 1933 Hitler's cabinet passed the Reich Cultural Chamber Law (the *Reichskulturkammergesetz*), giving Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels charge of an organization the new Law created, the Reich Cultural Chamber. The legislation stipulated seven individual chambers subsumed under the Reich Cultural Chamber, one of which was the Reich Theatre Chamber. It in turn had seven organizations (the Nazis seem to like the number seven) subsumed under it.

The Theatre Chamber's presidium retained the right to license productions for any theatre performance; but like most bureaucracies, it expanded its domain of authority, increased its budgetary needs, and consolidated its power. The Reich Theater Act (*Reichstheatergesetz*) in 1934 sustained those efforts. On September 15, 1935 the Theatrical Trade Guild (*Fachschaft Bühne*) was founded in accordance with the so-called Nuremberg Laws, which redefined the legal status of several classes of citizens within Germany. Dr. Rainer Schlösser was named Reich Dramaturg, with authority over all aspects of repertoire selection in the Reich. His Reich Dramaturgical Bureau considered itself the intellectual nerve center of German theatrical season planning, and within this viper's nest of intrigue some of the most significant occasions of legal circumvention during the Third Reich took place. The Reich Dramaturgical Bureau

(R.D.B.) had published a List of Abusive and Undesirable Literature for the Stage (*Liste des schädlichen und unerwünschten Bühnenschriftums*) and the list was constantly being upgraded and expanded. Some playwrights, such as Franz Arnold, Bertolt Brecht, Carl Zuckmayer, and Bruno Frank got on the list at the beginning and stayed there through the end. Others temporarily got on the list, then got off it, then got back on it again, and in some cases got hired by the regime which had initially banished them to write screenplays!

Circumvention of laws regarding repertoire selection was especially curious in the case of comedy. The idea performing comedy, and performing a lot of comedy, during one the most systematic reigns of terror the world has ever known may at first blush seem somewhat degraded; researching comedy during the Third Reich may appear downright perverse, but even Nazis were capable of innocent laughter. The perception of most people, especially in the English-speaking world, is that German comedy in the first place is an oxymoron. The fact is that of the more than 42,000 productions were staged between 1933 and 1944 in the Third Reich, and the majority were of comedies.

The most popular comedy in the Third Reich by a contemporary playwright<sup>1</sup> was August Hinrichs= *Wenn der Hahn kräht* (When the Rooster Crows), the kind of comedy that accorded with Nazi taste. It is a Rustic comedy set in a rural village with action concentrating the hardy Afolk, but is actually an imitation of Carl Zuckmayer=s banned *Der fröhliche Weinberg* (The

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<sup>1</sup>The most frequently produced comedy of all was Lessing=s *Minna von Barnhelm*, with 203 productions. Hinrichs can claim to be the most frequently produced comic playwright, however; *When the Rooster Crows* was produced 182 times, and his *Krach um Iolanthe* (Row Over Iolanthe) was close behind, with 157 productions. Together, those comedies were performed nearly 20,000 times.

Merry Vineyard), one of the most popular and frequently performed plays during the Weimar Republic.<sup>2</sup> When Goebbels and other Nazi officials called for more *Heimat-Kunst* (AHearth and Home Culture@), the absence of Zuckmayer and other creators of AAbusive and Undesirable Literature@ (*Schädliches und Unerwünschtes Schriftum*) an *ersatz*, or substitute AHeimat Kunst@ filled the void. Thus *When the Rooster Crows* and comedies like it succeeded, they did so in an artificially created market.

National Socialism aspired to keep the German theatre tradition vital and was especially desirous of fostering comedy that embodied the Awill of the people.@ National Socialists saw themselves as stewards of what was best in German culture. Once the Nazis settled into the saddle of power, they assigned comedy an important role in the task of Are-awakening the spirit of the people@ because comedy Acomes from the heart. It springs from the depths of the peoples= roots as a nation,@ according to one comedy expert in the Propaganda Ministry and Ait unites us as a people.@<sup>3</sup> Comedies like Zuckmayer=s, while enormously popular, had done Aenormous damage to the integrity of the German people@ because they exposed Alife-sustaining values@ to Acheap, easy laughter.@<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>*The Merry Vineyard*, while stupendously successful, was not even Zuckmayer=s most frequently performed play. The playwright=s work was banned en toto in March of 1933; that included all his published short stories, poems, children=s plays, translations (e.g. Anderson and Stallings= *What Price Glory?*) and even his screenplay for *Der blaue Engel* (The Blue Angel). Zuckmayer=s comedies, however, were the immediate target because they presented German Afolk life@ with a generally leftist political slant and were also extremely popular. They comprised 2% of all plays done in Germany between 1929 and 1933, a remarkable figure for a contemporary playwright. Leading the list was *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick* (The Captian of Köpenick), with eighty one productions and *Katherina Knie* with seventy eight.

<sup>3</sup>Wilhelm Westecker, quoted in Peter Bumm, *Drama und Theater der konservativen Revolution* (Munich: Verlag UNI-Druck, 1971) 130.

<sup>4</sup>Walter K. G. Best, *Völkische Dramaturgie* (Würzburg: 1940), 92. A[Sie] haben dem völkischen Bestand

Theatre audiences in Nazi Germany, however, actually *preferred* cheap, easy laughter and wanted more of it. Playwrights and theatre directors were therefore under enormous pressure to produce Apolitically correct@ comedies that also attracted audiences. Hinrichs= *When the Rooster Crows* was such a comedy, featuring characters with traits dear to heart of what had become Aofficial@ theatre culture in Germany. They spoke in a stage-adapted dialect which was originally in Plattdeutsch, their chicanery was politically harmless, and they refer to each other with the required number of barnyard abuses (*Schafskopf*, or Asheep=s head@), *Döskopf* (Asleepy head@), *Torfkopf* (Apeat moss head@, etc.) to keep an urban audience amused.

Maximilian Böttcher=s *Krach im Hinterhaus* (Uproar in the Inner Courtyard) was the second most frequently performed comedy by a contemporary playwright in the Third Reich. By 1940 it had been performed over 5,000 times.<sup>5</sup> It is an imitation ABerlin Folk Comedy,@ which achieved its greatest popularity beginning in the mid-19th century and culminated in Gerhart Hauptmann=s *Der Biberpelz* (The Beaver Coat). Many Nazi-era newspaper critics noted similarities between Böttcher and Hauptmann, while carefully avoiding any direct praise of *The Beaver Coat*. Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, after all, declared that Hauptmann had not really written plays but Amerely gnawed at the rotten roots of the 19th century middle classes and constructed theatrical pieces from newspaper reports.@<sup>6</sup> Hauptmann had nevertheless won

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enormen Schaden zugefügt . . . weil sie lebenserhaltende Werte dem wiehernden Gelächter preisgaben.@

<sup>5</sup>These figures are based on surveys completed in archives at the Institute for Theatre History at the Free University of Berlin.

<sup>6</sup>Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Hohenheim, 1939), 444. AEin Gerhart Hauptmann nagte doch bloß an den morschen Wurzeln des Bürgertums des 19. Jahrhunderts, konstruierte

the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1912, and the Nazis always tried to acknowledge him as one of the leading figures in their cultural pantheon.

Fritz Peter Buch=s *Ein ganzer Kerl* (A Man=s Man) paid similar tribute by way of imitation to another Nobel Prize Winner, namely George Bernard Shaw. Shaw=s critique of the ruling class in Great Britain was agreeable to the Nazi hierarchy, and his Darwinian/Nietzschean ideas about the AÜbermensch@ found particular resonance. Extremist Nazis, such as those editorializing in *Der SA-Mann* and *Das schwarze Korps*, wanted Shaw out of all repertoires, but Reich Dramaturg Schlösser defended Shaw, claiming he had become a Ahalf-classic@ and Awe=ll get nowhere by fighting [internally] over him.@<sup>7</sup> With the outbreak of war, the number of Shaw productions dropped, and in March of 1941 a general order from Schlösser went out to all *Intendanten* (managing artistic directors of theatres) that productions of both Shakespeare and Shaw should be stopped. A week later, however, an directive to thirteen provincial stages countermanded that order. Then in July of 1941 Hitler himself intervened and said that all Shaw productions should proceed. One of the reasons Shaw was welcomed back, although nobody has ever quoted Hitler on the subject, is that Hitler considered Shaw an Irishman and not English. At any rate, Shaw=s plays continued to be performed until August 1, 1944.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal was deceased before the Nazis took power, but he became a

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Theaterstücke nach Zeitungsmeldungen, >bildete= sich dann, verließ die ringende soziale Bewegung, aesthetisierte sich im galizischen Dunschkreis des >Berliner Tageblatts,= nahm vor dem Photographen die Haltung Goethes und ließ sich dann 1918 nach dem Siege der Börse von ihrer Presse dem deutschen Volk als dessen >größter Dichter= vorsetzen.@

<sup>7</sup>Federal German Archive Potsdam, Number 50.01, file 217, p. 71.

controversial figure within the RDB after the Nazi theatre historian Heinz Kindermann in 1939 condemned Hofmannsthal's works as Acontortions of what had been folk drama.<sup>8</sup>

Hofmannsthal's works for the stage were not widely popular anyway, but his name was on the R.D.B. black list because of his Jewish background. Yet his libretti for the operas of Richard Strauss were permitted.<sup>9</sup> Hofmannsthal had champions on the editorial board of no less a publication than the *Schwarze Korps*, which estimable publication in its November, 1941 issue argued the dubious certainty that Hofmannsthal was Aonly@ a AVierteljude,@ meaning one of his grandparents had been Jewish. The editorial also suggested that Hofmannsthal be recognized as an Austrian folk poet. That suggestion never came to fruition, but the Strauss-Hofmannsthal operas continued in production.

Rudolf Lothar (1865-1965) had written over sixty comedies before the Nazi takeover, and in March of 1933 he went into Viennese exile. From Austria he wrote comedies under the name AHans Heinz Egger-Welsburg@ and smuggled them onto German stages through the efforts of publisher Otto Eirich. In 1936 the Drei Masken Verlag in Berlin got wind of Egger-Welsburg's real identity and contacted Schlösser. Soon thereafter the R.D.B. (of which Schlösser was chief) stepped up its effort to control more effectively comedies coming in from outside Germany written by playwrights with whom they were not familiar and promulgated new application rules for performance licenses, including the regulation that all applications be accompanied by 1.) Aryan certification, 2.) affidavits signed by two members of the Reich

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<sup>8</sup>Heinz Kindermann, ASpiel und Drama der Ostmark,@ *Die Bühne* 11 (1939): 262.

<sup>9</sup>Boguslaw Drewniak, *Das Theater im NS-Staat* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1983) 245.



Culture Chamber living in Germany attesting to the Aryan pedigree of the author or that said author be otherwise recommended, and 3.) a signed declaration of the author agreeing to the withholding of all royalties in escrow for a period of six months, with the understanding that said payments shall be rendered in default should the sworn testimony of said author be found in error.

The idiosyncrasies of dictatorship made rules like these inconsistently enforced, and again Rudolf Lothar was in the middle of at least one other instance in which provisions to banish him proved ineffective. He had written the libretti for two operas which remained in repertoires. One was *Friedemann Bach*, but the other, more significant one was *Tiefland*, which featured music by Paul Graener. It turned out that Hitler was extremely fond of *Tiefland* and could not bear to see it banned; Paul Graener, on the other hand, was the vice-president of the Reich Music Chamber and was loathe to ban his own work.<sup>10</sup>

The most curious case of problematic control over playwriting in the Third Reich came deceptively early in the regime's existence. Robert Neuner's comedy *Das lebenslängliche Kind* (The Life-long Child) opened September 7, 1934 and had ninety one subsequent productions (and over 900 performances) for the next four years. Months previous to the opening, however, rumors had circulated that Robert Neuner was actually Erich Kästner, the internationally famous author of the children's book *Emil and the Detectives*. Schlösser investigated the rumors and learned from Robert Neuner's publisher that Robert Neuner was indeed a pseudonym,

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<sup>10</sup>Thomas Eicher, *Theater im Dritten Reich*, Diss. Free University of Berlin, 1992, 140.

but for a writer named Werner Buhre. Buhre wrote Schlösser to claim that he was the play's sole author. He then admitted under oath in late 1938 that he and Kästner had worked together on a film and had perhaps discussed the play some years previous. Schlösser was unimpressed with Buhre's explanation and ordered all productions of the play halted. It remained unperformed until New Year's Eve of 1939, when the Staatstheater Hamburg and the Städtische Bühne Königsberg did revivals. They did so because the Gestapo had investigated the circumstance of Buhre's encounter with Kästner and determined the collaboration of the Aryan Kästner to be minimal.<sup>11</sup>

But the rumors refused to die after even after the play was permitted renewed performance, followed by several productions in 1940 and the 1940/41 seasons. A critic in Hamburg wondered if the next play from Robert Neuner would be *Emil and the Detectives*, and noted that Erich Kästner had written a novel titled *Drei Männer im Schnee* (Three Men in the Snow), which has the same plot as *The Life-long Child*.<sup>12</sup> Again the entire case against Buhre was opened, and Buhre testified this time (in 1943) that he and Kästner were such good friends that they had developed a literary symbiosis; one had decided to develop the material for the stage, the other in narrative form. Schlösser was persuaded on this occasion, perhaps because the war was going badly by that time and he considered the play a usable and harmless comedy anyway. He was undoubtedly moved by the pleas of several producers who

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<sup>11</sup>Federal German Archive Potsdam 50.01, File 200, p. 92

<sup>12</sup>Max Alexander Neumann, rev. of *Das lebenslängliche Kind*, Hamburger Nachrichten 13 October 1941, n. pag.

wanted to do a play with proven popularity among audiences. He gave his permission, but forbade its being made into a film.

The upshot of this episode however, was that Erich Kästner, a Jew whose books had been ritually burned in 1933 and had been on Nazi blacklists since that year as well, left the safety of his Swiss exile and under special permission from the Propaganda Ministry (presumably from Joseph Goebbels himself), re-entered Germany, and under the pseudonym ABerthold Bürger@ completed screenplays for two Nazi films: *Münchhausen* and *Der kleine Grenzverkehr*. The title of the latter is especially ironic: in English it means AA little border traffic.@ Such border de-regulations were possible only in a regime run by a gang of murderous thugs who considered themselves artistically sensitive, so conscious of their role as preservers of German culture that their preoccupation with regulations made their application of them erratic and mercurial. That administrative instability exposed the inherent contradiction within the Nazi theatre bureaucracy, one that sought to preserve and foster the theatre while attempting to regulate much of it to the margins of social and political consequence.